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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Wednesday, December 6, 1933.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Underweight Children and the Eating Problem." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

--ooOoo--

After that talk you and I had on the best way for thin people to gain, a man came in to see me and asked why I didn't say something about the problem of the underweight child. He said he had a little boy, eight years old, who was considerably below average in pounds. Each time his health report came home from school, it brought the same story. The teacher wrote that the child was undernourished and asked the family's cooperation in improving his diet.

"Well," said this man, "goodness knows, we serve the boy enough food -- and the right kind of food, too. We set the best of everything before him -- all kinds of nourishing dishes. The trouble isn't with the meals; it's with the child. We're willing to cooperate, but he isn't. He simply refuses what's set before him -- won't touch milk, balks at all vegetables and eggs -- in fact, dislikes almost everything but sweets. Talking to him, telling him how he needs those foods, urging him to eat, begging, coaxing, scolding, even punishing and offering rewards -- none of these methods works one bit.

"Now," said this father, "please tell me how your friends, the child feeding specialists, would go about getting my son to gain."

Well, there is a real problem -- and lots of parents have it. In spite of all our new knowledge of nutrition, a great number of children are undernourished just because they refuse to eat. And their parents are at their wits' end to know what to do about it. A very odd situation. On one hand we have the doctors and nutritionists, parents, nurses and welfare workers, all armed with a knowledge of correct feeding that might build a race of Apollos of the next generation. And on the other hand we have all these youngsters who just plain refuse their food. If you don't believe this is a big problem, try forcing the bottle on a contrary baby. Or try insisting that little Andrew eat all his carrots, like a nice boy. If little Andrew has a will of his own, he'll find plenty of ways of avoiding those carrots. He'll discover all the stunts from dawdling and playing with his food to tantrums -- or even to returning the food you forced down him. And little Andrew will probably win out over his fond and terrified parents. That's why plenty of well-to-do, yes, and intelligent, families today include an undernourished, irritable, difficult child and a worried, anxious mother and an irate father. Mealtimes have become battlegrounds where the youngsters fight it out against their parents and the youngsters too often come out victorious.

Well, the child feeding specialists say that probably the most successful ways of solving this refusal problem are: building good food habits and cultivating appetites. Of course, good food habits should start in babyhood. But with the eating-problem child, it's a case of rebuilding habits, substituting new good habits for the poor ones he now has. Of course, a really sick child naturally refuses food -- and with good reason. But the large majority of youngsters push away their plates for psychological reasons. Perhaps mealtime has been made unpleasant for them somehow. With all this new scientific nutrition knowledge abroad, a lot of parents are so anxious to get the proper number of calories and minerals and vitamins into children, that they forget that meals should, first of all, be pleasant, that the child should be happy when he eats and have a chance to enjoy his dinner. Perhaps the child has learned to dislike certain foods because he has had unpleasant experience with them, has been forced to eat when he was frightened, angry or disappointed. Happiness at mealtime, a calm cheerful atmosphere at the table, and food that appeals to the child's eye -- these things are more important than counting calories. You see, the idea is to wake up Andrew's appetite and help him enjoy his food. Once you've done that, you won't have to worry about undernourishment.

Still another reason why young Andrew may be refusing his food is his desire for attention and excitement. What small person wouldn't get some satisfaction out of finding the power he can have over the grown-ups, the hullabaloo he can cause in the household just by refusing to swallow his dinner? Why, he can actually make mother and grandmother and father all frantic and even bring out the doctor. Here's where the child-feeding specialists say that a calm, detached attitude on the parent's part often remedies the situation. Give young Andrew a chance to eat. If he refuses, let him go without food -- even for several meals. Get him over the idea that you care too much whether he eats or not. Be sure he gets nothing to eat in between meals. Generally, he won't miss many meals before he comes around.

I know that a lot of parents don't believe it, but the psychologists and child feeding experts insist that liking food is just a matter of learning. They say no child is born with a prejudice against one food and a fondness for another. Experience, pleasant or unpleasant associations, teach him likes and dislikes. If you tell the specialists that your little Andrew inherits his dislike of milk from his father, they won't believe you. They'll tell you that Andrew is a pretty smart young one, that at a very early age he was keeping his eyes and ears open and taking in plenty of impressions of what was going on around him. It didn't take him long to get onto the fact that his daddy didn't like milk. And, since most children imitate their elders, little Andrew soon was saying he didn't want his milk.

This is why parents have to be careful not only what they say about food before the children, but also how they act about it. A small hint may have a big influence on small minds. It's up to the older member of the family to set an example at the table that the small ones will follow successfully. Less urging, less talk about eating, and better examples from father and mother and big sister will often work wonders in a "persnickety" child.

Appetite is usually a mental expression of how the child feels physically. The experts say that a healthy child who has played vigorously out of doors and slept long hours in the fresh air, is usually ready to eat when the dinner bell rings. Naturally, his desire to eat is increased by hunger. So an empty stomach encourages appetite, and it's a good idea to allow children time between meals for stomachs to empty and produce a "hungry appetite". This is one of the big arguments against eating between meals. Eating at all hours or running regular meals too close together -- these usually spoil appetites. Experts find that the looks of food also has much to do with appetite. Serve food at a pretty table on gay dishes. See that it looks attractive, and tempting and that it tastes as good as it looks. Give the youngster small helpings that look and taste like more.

Well, these are only a few suggestions that both parents and experts have found helpful. We'll talk about others some other day.

Tomorrow: "Food Standards and the New Law."

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